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ABSTRACT

To ameliorate violence in schools, many programs are being developed to provide students with tools to help them successfully resolve conflicts. However, there is a limited amount of quantitative data supporting their effectiveness. This study was an effort to add to the pool of research on the effectiveness of peer mediation training in schools. The study evaluated the Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program (George and Keiter, 1993) by surveying student and administrator attitudes about the program. Participants were third, fourth, and fifth graders at seven schools in Florida who received 13.5 hours of training as peer mediators. Approximately 1 month after being trained they were asked to respond to a 6-item survey constructed to solicit their perceptions regarding conflict, peer mediation, and the training process. At the end of the 1995-96 school year, 14 administrators also responded to a survey to determine their perceptions of the effect of peer mediation at their schools. Results showed that the overwhelming majority of student peer mediators would become a mediator again if given the choice. They reported that the best part of being a mediator was resolving conflicts, while the most difficult part was describing and paraphrasing the conflict and brainstorming solutions. Those who tried to resolve conflicts were generally successful, but about half had not participated in conflict resolutions due largely to low solicitation from their peers. All administrators felt that the peer mediation had made a positive impact on the general atmosphere of their schools and was cost effective, with administrative referrals down. (Contains 14 references.) (EV)

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PEER MEDIATION TRAINING: A SOLUTION TO VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

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According to data from the National League of Cities cited by Johnson and Johnson (1995), violence in schools increased by 33% between 1990 and 1994. Causes for this increase have been attributed to changing family patterns and society's acceptance of violence as normal. Abt and Seesholtz (as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1995) also reminded us that many television shows blur boundaries between good and evil, thereby contributing to the acceptance of violence in schools as the norm. Intervention programs are needed.

Morton Deutsch developed a theoretical framework for conflict resolution programs. Deutsch maintained that conflict is a natural occurrence within a variety of settings. Therefore, rather than try to prevent conflicts, teachers and others should teach students ways to deal with conflict in a creative, constructive manner (Inger, 1992).

More recently, Deutsch articulated a plan for "educating for a peaceful world" (as cited in Webne-Behrman, 1993). This plan has four key components: cooperative learning, conflict resolution training, the constructive use of controversy in teaching subject matter, and the creation of dispute settlement centers within schools.

What acts of violence are most prevalent in schools? Johnson and Johnson (1995) identified the types of conflicts occurring in schools as being physical aggression and access to or possession of valued resources such as playground equipment, computers, or books. In another survey of crime and violent acts, 42% of high school seniors reported having had property stolen at school, 14% reported being injured without a weapon being used, and 6% said they were injured with a weapon (Ostertag, 1996).

To ameliorate violence in schools, many programs are being developed to provide students with tools to help them successfully resolve conflicts. However, there is a limited amount of quantitative data supporting their effectiveness (Cutrona & Guerin, 1994). To date, most documentation for program effectiveness comes from studies conducted by Johnson and Johnson (1995). In their studies, it was found that prior to conflict resolution training, elementary students referred most of their conflicts to the teacher, used destructive strategies, and lacked problem-solving knowledge (Johnson and Johnson & Dudley, 1992).

One of the resolution strategies used during training in the Johnson and Johnson (1995) research was peer mediation. Trained peer mediators follow prescribed procedures to assist disputants in resolving conflicts. They act as neutral third parties promoting active listening, cooperation between disputants, and creative problem solving.

This is the same process used by lawyers and mediators to help adults negotiate solutions to conflicts. In this light, the question may be asked, "Can elementary students learn the mediation process?" George, Keiter, Halpin, Halpin and Dagnese (1995) found that students in third through fifth grades were able to learn mediation vocabulary, as well as knowledge of the mediation process. It was also found that girls showed a greater gain than boys and students from low socioeconomic schools had a wider margin of improvement than students from middle and higher socioeconomic schools on tests administered before and after peer mediation training.

Determining if a school peer mediation program is successful may be accomplished by comparing behavior referrals for similar time periods before and after program inception. Results of one such study indicated that, following negotiation and mediation training, conflicts that teachers had to manage dropped 89% after the training and the number of conflicts referred to the principal was reduced to zero (Johnson and Johnson, Dudley, & Acikgoz, 1994).

Woo (1996) feels that a peer mediation program will free teachers and administrators to concentrate on educating students, rather than spending an inordinate amount of time resolving student conflicts. Woo's training model includes role playing different conflict scenarios, which provides trainees practice in handling similar situations.

An important goal of peer mediation is for the skill of resolving conflicts to transfer to other settings. In a study conducted with 227 elementary students, Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, and Magnuson (1995) found through analysis of self-report data that students used negotiation and mediation strategies learned at school in the home. The types of conflicts children

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become involved in at home and at school was another variable examined in this study. Conflicts over preferences/values and possession/access were more frequent in the home than the school (82% versus 54%). Physical fights and verbal insults made up 25% of the conflicts at school but only 8% of the conflicts at home.

In yet another study examining transfer of knowledge and skills of peer mediation training to the home setting, Gentry and Beneson (1992) found that the number of siblings in the home and socioeconomic level of the family had an effect on the way children resolve conflicts. Children with three siblings tended to react less intensely to sibling conflict than those children with one sibling. Also, parents with a family income of $26,000 or more reported a greater incidence of adult intervention in conflicts between their children than parents with lower levels of income.

Currently, administrators are looking at the cost effectiveness of mediation programs. Most funding for mediation training comes from federal or state agencies. However, many federal funds are being cut and local money often is diverted to more pressing school needs. This situation paints a rather bleak picture for the future of conflict resolution programs (Kmitta, 1996).

It has been suggested that institutionalizing conflict resolution theory and practices by absorbing them into the administrative and managerial structure of the school and infusing them into as much of the curricula as possible would contain costs and help the school as a whole (staff, parents, and students) integrate resolution into their lives (Inger, 1992).

If conflict resolution programs are to become infused into school curricula, there should be evaluation information available to help make sound program choices. According to Burton's book, Conflict: Practice in Management, Settlement, and Resolution, "There is almost no research into the effects of these programs, and evaluation is heavily affected by wishful thinking. More research, and more critical analysis, must precede any satisfactory evaluation" (cited in Kmitta, 1994, p. 32).

The paucity of research on conflict resolution programs is being alleviated somewhat by Dr. Tricia Jones, Temple University, who is conducting a major study comparing effectiveness of school-based conflict resolution programs in four large cities in the United States. This three year study is in the initial stage of implementation, and preliminary results should be reported in the near future (Waters, 1996).

The present study is another effort to add to the pool of research on the effectiveness of peer mediation training in schools. The Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program (George and Keiter, 1993) was developed to teach elementary students conflict resolution skills. Reported herein are results of an evaluation of this program.

Research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Following 13 1/2 hours of training would students (a) choose to become peer mediators again, if given the choice? (b) use mediation skills at home or with friends? (c) find that peers try to get them into conflicts? (d) think the best part of being a mediator is helping peers resolve conflicts?
2. Following 1, 2, or 3 years of having the Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program in their schools, would administrators (a) feel that the program has made a positive impact on the general atmosphere of the school? (b) feel that teachers support the program? (c) feel that administrative referrals have decreased? (d) feel that parents have shown an interest in peer mediation? (e) feel that the money spent for training is cost effective?

Method

Students in the third ($n = 38$), fourth ($n = 61$), and fifth ($n = 60$) grades at seven schools in Florida were participants in this study. In this group, there were 98 females and 61 males. Their socioeconomic status was high (28.3%), middle (47.8%), and low (23.9%).

These students were trained in their respective schools by the researchers to be peer mediators. The Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program (George & Keiter, 1993) was used.

Approximately 1 month after being trained, these peer mediators were asked to respond to a six-item survey constructed to solicit their perceptions regarding conflict, peer mediation, and the training process.

At the end of the 1995-96 school year, administrators from elementary schools in which students were trained in the Peaceful Solutions Peer Mediation Training Program were given a survey to determine their perceptions of the effect of peer mediation at their schools. Fourteen administrators responded.

Results

For the student survey, frequencies and percentages were determined for each item. Results are as follows:

1. The most difficult part of the mediation process is

	Number	Percent
(a) the opening statement	29	18.2
(b) describing and paraphrasing the conflict	55	34.6

(c) solution storming	55	34.6
(d) mapping agreement	20	12.6

2. If given a choice, would you become a mediator again?

	Number	Percent
(a) Yes	154	96.9
(b) No	5	3.1

3. I have tried to resolve conflicts at home and

	Number	Percent
(a) was successful	46	28.9
(c) it didn't work	28	17.6
(c) have not tried	85	53.5

4. I have tried to resolve conflicts with my friends and

	Number	Percent
(a) was successful	53	33.3
(b) it didn't work	28	17.6
(c) have not tried	78	49.1

5. Since I became a peer mediator, others have tried to get me into a conflict

	Number	Percent
(a) Yes	39	24.5
(b) No	120	75.5

6. The best part of being a peer mediator is

	Number	Percent
(a) resolving conflicts	99	62.3
(b) getting out of class	34	21.4
(c) being in charge	26	16.3

For the administrator survey, frequencies and percentages were also determined for each item. Results are as follows:

1. This school has been a mediation school for

	Number	Percent
1 year	2	14.3
2 years	9	64.3
3 years	3	21.4

2. This school has another behavior values program.

	Number	Percent
Yes	9	64.3
No	5	35.7

3. Peer mediation has made a positive impact on the general atmosphere of the school.

	Number	Percent
Yes	10	71.4
Somewhat	4	28.6
No	0	0

4. Teachers support peer mediation.

	Number	Percent
Yes	9	64.3
Somewhat	5	35.7
No	0	0

5. Administrative referrals have decreased this year.

	Number	Percent
Yes	8	57.1
Somewhat	6	42.9
No	0	0

6. The peer mediation program will continue.

	Number	Percent
Yes	13	92.9
No	1	7.1

7. Parents have shown an interest in peer mediation.

	Number	Percent
Yes	4	28.6
Somewhat	7	50
No	3	21.4

8. The money for training is cost effective.

	Number	Percent
Yes	11	78.6
Somewhat	2	14.3
No	1	7.1

Discussion

The overwhelming majority of the student peer mediators would become a peer mediator again if given the choice. The best part of being a peer mediator, they reported, was resolving conflicts. The most difficult parts of the process were describing and paraphrasing the conflict and brainstorming solutions. Of those who tried to resolve conflicts at home or with friends, substantially more found that they were successful than unsuccessful. However, it should be noted that approximately half of the peer mediators had not at the time of the survey participated in conflict resolutions. This finding could be attributable in part to the fact that, for the majority of the peer mediators, others had not tried to get them involved in conflict.

All of the administrators responding to the survey felt that peer mediators had made a positive impact on the general atmosphere at their schools. Administrative referrals had decreased, and teachers were supportive of the program. Agreeing that peer mediation was cost effective, the overwhelming majority indicated that the peer mediation program would be continued. Some additional outreach might be needed, however, to stimulate more parental interest.

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